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## Book Review: Roots

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## Books

### Roots

By Alex Haley

Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y.  
587 pp., \$12.50

Reviewed by Genevieve Ekaete

This book is innovative and extraordinary because its author, Alex Haley, breathes human life into his African characters. In this respect he breaks new grounds just as one was beginning to settle down with the annoying notion that perhaps American writers—both Black and white—are hopelessly incapable of casting Africans outside of the anthropological specimen mold. Haley makes Westerners realize that cohesion and dignity in life existed in pre-slavery Africa and they didn't just happen. Africans through time had evolved ways of life and philosophical tenets that are so obvious and so simple they are mindboggling. Take, for example, the revelation Omoro makes to his little, Kunta Kinte, in explanation of death (and life) in general and the boy's grandmother's in particular:

*"He said that three groups of people lived in every village. First were those you could see—walking around, eating, sleeping, and working. Second were the ancestors, whom Grandma Yaisa had now joined.*

*'And the third people—who are they?'* asked Kunta.

*"The third people,"* said Omoro, *"are those waiting to be born."*

Needless to say, this holistic view of life was needed then, and especially now and certainly for the future. A society that accounts for even its unborn is the least likely candidate to breed an ecological disaster in the world or create nuclear holocaust.

*Roots* starts out as a beautiful and idyllic story of young Kunta Kinte's

sweetly close to that state at seventeen in 1767, he is snatched away by white slavers and readied for the gruesome journey to the United States. The horrendous condition of the slave ship is drilled home so mercilessly by Haley that the reader becomes immune to pain. Besides, that territory has well been captured in Black literature and history books.

Haley's genius comes in his ability and endurance in tracking down details about his African ancestors. He found himself clinging tightly unto the core of his grandmother's and old relatives' stories, which he recognized as oral tradition. He found out that his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, had been taken into slavery while cutting wood to make himself a new drum in the region of the Gambia River. He learned that Kunta Kinte was too proud to easily settle for the role of a slave. He made four unsuccessful attempts to escape. Caught each time and the last time given a choice between castration and amputation of his leg, he chose to be amputated at his right knee as punishment. Kunta Kinte married and taught his only child, daughter Kizzy, the history of his ancestors and even some African words. She, in turn, passed the history down through her own children. It went through six generations until a few words of his noble ancestor, Kunta Kinte, filtered to Haley and he, blessed with an undaunted spirit (the book took 12 years of research) decided to take on the task of tracing his family tree.

Alex Haley had quit college at 17 to enlist into the U. S. Coast Guard as a messboy when World War II broke out. When he retired 20 years later in 1959 he sought a writing career. He published in the *Reader's Digest*, *Playboy* and collaborated with Malcolm X on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

While in the British Museum in 1971 another story, Haley became

mesmerized by the Rosetta stone. Further readings about it only enrapt him the more. He thought about important words—they seemed important—that his ancestor Kunta Kinte had hammered into the children:

*"Kin-tay,"* he had said, *was his name. "Ko" he had called a guitar. "Kamby Bolongo" he had called a river in Virginia. They were mostly sharp, angular sounds, with k predominating. These sounds probably had undergone some changes across the generations of being passed down, yet unquestionably they represented phonetic snatches of whatever was the specific tongue spoken by my African ancestor who was a family legend. My plane from London was circling to land at New York with me wondering: What specific African tongue was it? Was there any way in the world that maybe I could find out?"*

Dr. Jan Vansina, a renowned historian of Africa and professor in the University of Wisconsin assured Haley that the African words he was seeking meanings for were from the Mandinka language spoken by the Mandingo people of the Gambia.

Naturally, Haley was ripe for his field work in the Gambia. And he superbly foretells what happened there:

*"There is an expression called 'the peak experience'—that which emotionally, nothing in your life ever transcends. I've had mine, that first day in the back country of Black West Africa."*

He listened spellbound to a griot (griots have been adequately described as the libraries of their people) narrate the histories of Haley's ancestors—a feat which is bound to register around this country as the triumph of oral tradition.

*"I sat as if I were carved of stone. My blood seemed to have congealed. This man whose lifetime had been in this back-country African village had no way in the world to know that he had just echoed what I had heard all through my boy-hood years on my grandma's front porch in Henning, Tennessee . . . of an African who always had insisted that his name was 'Kin-tay'; who had called a guitar 'ko,' and a river within the state of Virginia, 'Kamby Bolongo'; and who had been kidnapped into slavery while not far from his village, chopping wood, to make himself a drum."*

*which is us, we are you, and you are us!"*

This book will probably raise the number of Blacks tracing their particular roots. There will be more emotional reunions. Nothing is wrong with that—all people need a sense of home. Haley's book may already have helped to raise the status of the griots in today's Africa. Recently seen as incongruous and incompatible with modernity, griots have fallen into abuse. If this book helps in that effort it will only go to prove that children who return home sometimes do so bearing gifts. Haley's gifts for Africa are bountiful. □

The griot was interrupted. About 70 agitated villagers moved closer together in the open air. A strange homecoming event was about to take place. The people formed a human circle around Haley and moved counter-clockwise as they chanted. And Haley tells the story best:

*"The woman who broke from the moving circle was one of about a dozen whose infant children were within cloth slings across their backs. Her jet-black face deeply contorting, the woman came charging toward me, her bare feet slapping the earth, and snatching her baby free, she thrust it at me almost roughly, the gesture saying 'Take!' . . . and I did, clasping the baby to me. Then she snatched away her baby; and another woman was thrusting her baby, then another, and another . . . until I had embraced probably a dozen babies. I wouldn't learn until maybe a year later, from a Harvard University professor, Dr. Jerome Bruner, a scholar of such matters, "You didn't know you were participating in one of the oldest ceremonies of humankind, called 'The laying on of hands'! In their way, they were telling you 'Through this flesh*